

Level 4 schools Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a Level 4 school?

A Level 4 school is an “underperforming” school and is both low performing on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System over a four year period (in both ELA and math) and not showing signs of substantial improvement over that time. “Level 4” refers to the placement of those schools in the state’s Framework for District Accountability and Assistance (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/default.html>).

2. Why is ESE identifying “likely” Level 4 schools before final regulations are promulgated?

ESE has been trying to strike the right balance here, recognizing three competing needs and opportunities: 1) the need for final regulations to guide the school turnaround process, 2) the availability now of major federal grants to support school turnaround work that require thoughtful planning to commence now if the funds are to be used next fall; and, 3) the urgency of the need to meet the needs of students in the state’s lowest performing schools. We seek to give districts and schools enough early notice of the names of the schools so they can begin planning early enough to improve the conditions of those schools by next school year. The full set of regulations may not be officially final until as late as June

For this reason, ESE submitted draft regulations to the Board in January to give the Legislature more than 30 days to review the identification criteria (as per the law). ESE has waited until that period is finished before announcing the “likely” Level 4 schools. ESE is using the same identification criteria that it presented to the Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council last year and to the Board on two separate occasions without debate. The criteria are consistent with the language in the law enacted in January.

3. How does Level 4 status impact AYP and NCLB accountability status? Does AYP or NCLB status change when a school is declared a Level 4 school? How?

The school’s NCLB accountability status does not change when a school is declared Level 4. An AYP determination will still be made annually about the school as required under federal education law.

Level 4 designation is based on criteria distinct from federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations. The rising number of districts and schools unable to make their AYP targets – now exceeding 50% of all Massachusetts schools - required that ESE develop an alternative set of criteria to identify the schools in greatest need of intervention. These more selective criteria are based on mathematics and English Language Arts MCAS scores: absolute achievement over four years (composite performance index and percentage students earning failing/warning), annual student growth rate, and improvement trends over four years (change in composite performance index).

4. How many Level 4 schools are there currently?

With this announcement, there will be 35 Level 4 schools in 2010.

- 20 are elementary schools
- 8 are middle schools
- 3 are K-8 schools
- 4 are high schools
- 9 districts have Level 4 schools.

5. How are Level 4 schools identified? What data is used?

Level 4 Schools are the state's lowest performing schools based on an analysis of four-year trends in absolute achievement, student growth, and improvement trends as measured by MCAS. We use these mathematics and English Language Arts MCAS results: composite performance index and percentage students earning failing/warning scores over four years; annual student growth percentile for the years available; and improvement as measured by the change in composite performance index over four years.

The *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance* and the new law both call for the use of multiple indicators to identify schools as candidates for Level 4 accountability, assistance, and intervention activities. ESE is identifying schools that are both low performing on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System over a four year period and not showing signs of substantial improvement or strong positive annual student growth over that interval.

6. How does a school exit Level 4 status?

Level 4 schools can be moved out of status by fulfilling three criteria:

- a) Increase in student achievement for three years for students overall and for each subgroup of students, as shown by:
 - MCAS and student growth
 - Reduction in proficiency gap
 - (for high schools) higher education rate and a greater percentage of graduates enrolled in higher education within one year of graduation
- b) Evidence that the conditions are in place at the school level to sustain that improvement.
- c) Evidence that the conditions are in place at the district level to sustain that improvement.

7. What if the district/school is unsuccessful in getting out of Level 4 status?

If the school is unable to meet multiple annual goals, the Commissioner may designate it as a Level 5 school. This would result in "co-governance" of the school with joint ESE-district decision-making and governance in the hands of a receiver appointed by the Commissioner.

8. When does the clock start of the 3 year timetable?

ESE anticipates that the first cohort of Level 4 schools will be officially announced at the end of March, once its Board finalizes regulations. The three year timetable for rapid and sustainable improvement begins when the superintendent approves a Redesign Plan for the identified school. If a school has already begun turnaround efforts and chooses to submit an expedited redesign plan, the three years of improvement could end in June 2012. If the full stakeholder process is completed in developing a Redesign Plan, the three years of improvement would end in June 2013.

9. What about schools formerly declared or designated as “Underperforming”, “Chronically Underperforming” or “Commonwealth Priority Schools”?

Under the previous school accountability system, schools in Massachusetts could have been declared Underperforming, Chronically UP or Commonwealth Priority Schools. Any school previously declared as one of these types will now be classified in a particular Level under the new Accountability Framework using quantitative measures outlined in regulation. ESE will no longer utilize these terms to describe a school’s state accountability status (federal NCLB accountability designations will still apply). Schools previously declared one of these types may or may not be newly identified Level 4 schools, based on the data for identification with one exception: schools previously declared Chronically UP will automatically be placed in Level 4. If a school is now Level 4, it is required to develop a Redesign Plan. If a school is now a Level 3 school, it is expected to follow the requirements accordingly. The Board approved plans of these schools are no longer subject to Board overview. Districts are expected to support their improvement effectively.

Commonwealth Pilot schools (Co-Pilot schools) – This initiative was both an accountability status and school design under the previous school accountability system in Massachusetts. Currently, there are 4 Commonwealth Pilot schools operating under Board of Education and ESE approved design plans. These schools will transition into the new Accountability Framework with support and assistance from their districts and ESE. Some Co-Pilot schools will be placed in Level 4 based on the quantitative measures of identification. Some will become Level 3 schools.

10. Is there a limit on the number of Level 4 schools?

By statute, the state can have no more than 72 identified Level 4 and 5 schools at one time.

11. Why is ESE only identifying 35 Level 4 schools at this time?

ESE has committed to intervene in a number of schools in which it has the capacity to provide meaningful targeted assistance. Furthermore, ESE wants to ensure it has sufficient authority to designate more schools at Level 4 (and 5) in the future.

12. When would the state be identifying the next cohort of Level 4 schools?

ESE will consider identifying more Level 4 schools in September 2010 based on the 2010 student results and prior year analysis. These schools would be identified using the same metrics as currently being used (see Question 4).

13. What will be different in a Level 4 school?

These schools will be accelerated into high-functioning learning environments for students through a process of redesigning systems and supports of leadership, classroom instruction, and family partnerships. There will be rapid diagnosis of student needs, instruction will be tailored to the needs of each student, and there will be a culture of high expectations for students, parents, and families. Most importantly, these schools will deliver results for students. Students will learn at high levels in these schools.

14. What is a Redesign Plan? Does it take the place of a school improvement plan?

A Redesign Plan is the template that ESE will provide to meet the statutory requirements for a “turnaround plan” for the new state law, and will also serve as the foundation for any application for federal grant funding. The Redesign Plan will take the place of a school improvement plan, as well. The Redesign Plan will be a multi-part instrument that will, for a 3-year period:

- > Address District-level capacity to support low performing schools
- > Provide a blueprint for intervention at each identified school
- > Set measurable annual goals which serve as the standard for exiting Level 4 status

15. How will stakeholders be involved in decisions regarding the school? (Teachers, parents, students, community)

The new law requires that for each Level 4 school a stakeholder group with representation from the following groups make recommendations on the plan for redesigning the school: parent, teacher, administrators, school committee, teacher union, social services agency, Early Education and Care or Department of Higher Education representative, community member, and ESE representative.

16. Will parents have the right to transfer their child to another school from a Level 4 school?

Parents with children in Level 4 schools maintain the same rights to request a transfer to another school in the district as they did prior to the Level 4 identification.

17. What happens to teachers in Level 4 Schools?

ESE is committed to helping districts work with teachers in a collaborative way that values their expertise and commitment to children. Some teachers in these schools are effective and they should be encouraged to play a role in the planning and implementation of the school’s redesign. However, this call to action may not be the right fit for every teacher in the building. The law establishes conditions by which all staff in the school may be required to reapply for positions in the school.

18. What is the state’s role in Level 4 schools?

- Define Exit Criteria (state requirement)
 - Measurable Annual Goals tailored to each school and based on empirical data
 - See Draft Regulations for Description

- Assess LEA Capacity to Implement one of Four Intervention Models (federal requirement)
 - Assessed through ‘Capacity Checkpoints’
- Provide Targeted Assistance – partner providers, tools, templates, etc

19. What if a district can’t commit to choosing one of the four federal intervention models?

A district with a Level 4 school must commit to choosing one of the four federal intervention models in order to receive federal grant funding and Race to the Top funding. Schools that do not receive the grants will still be required to meet annual benchmarks of student performance consistent with state law.

20. Does a Principal need to be replaced in order to receive the grant?

Federal requirements mandate that no individual appointed principal of a Level 4 school prior to July 1, 2008 may remain as principal of that school. S/he may be reassigned to another position in the district if, in the judgment of the Superintendent, there is an appropriate match elsewhere. If a principal has served for fewer than two years at the school, then the Superintendent can propose to retain him/her if there is evidence that improvement is underway at the school.

21. How much money will each Level 4 school get from the state and for how long?

The district may apply for \$500,000 or more for each Level 4 school depending on the size of the school and whether the content and promise of the plan warrants more funding.

22. Is this federal grant considered an entitlement for low performing schools?

No, these are competitive grants that districts can apply for on behalf of their eligible schools. Districts must commit to implementing one of the four intervention models and demonstrate their capacity to do so.

Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act enables states to administer grants to school districts to “enable the lowest-achieving schools” to meet accountability requirements. USED requires that states administer these grants not as entitlements, but rather on a competitive basis based on “the LEA’s capacity to effectively implement the models and strategies outlined in the (grant) application”.

23. Is this grant renewable?

Grants are renewable for up to two additional years, contingent on the school achieving annual benchmarks of progress.

24. When will new schools be eligible?

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) expects to receive \$76 million over the next three years in School Turnaround Grant funds. ESE is anticipating the announcement of the grant competition later this month.